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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on defining experiential learning. Aspects of experiential and traditional approaches are compared, and a model of the experiential learning process designed to facilitate learning and learning how to learn is presented. Teacher and student roles in experiential training are discussed, and a comparison is made between the role of the experiential teacher and the traditional teacher. In conclusion, the author states that transition from the traditional role to the experiential role is not easy but is essentially a humanizing process. (PD)

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CROSS CULTURAL METHODS

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING-TEACHING

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CROSS CULTURAL METHODS

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING-TEACHING

Experiential learning focuses on information seeking, on the learning process and on learning how to learn. It presents a significant departure from the traditional area studies, information-transmission approach. It is student-centered rather than subject-centered, and is structured to achieve active rather than passive learner responsibility and involvement in the learning process.

Experiential learning enables the student to experience his feelings and reactions in the kinds of frustrating, ambiguous, and perplexing situations he is likely to encounter in his teaching assignment. He is involved in decision-making under pressure, risk-taking, and learning from his own experience. The teaching situation is structured to place the participant under the stresses of insufficient knowledge, to confront him with the necessity to make and act upon decisions with inadequate time, to judge the expectations and evaluations of others by their behavior and unspoken cues, to assess his own behavior in the light of these unspoken evaluations, and to modify his behavior accordingly. Requiring the student to cope with these predictable uncertainties and pressures helps him develop the skills, understanding, and confidence necessary to be successful as a teacher.

Experiential learning is thus emotional as well as intellectual, and involves behavior analysis and skill practice. It involves the learner actively (working alone and with others) in:

Experiencing situations similar or analogous to those he might encounter as a teacher;

Identifying and analyzing carefully chosen problems, particularly those of critical interest, conflict, or difference in cross cultural situations;

Exploring alternative solutions to these problems and the probable consequences;

Examining his own feelings and reactions in the various problems and situations presented;

Examining his own values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and expectations and the problems these might create in another culture;

Attempting to integrate and conceptualize the learning that results from these experiences and analyses;

Generalizing from the learning experience to the anticipated living and working situation in the classroom;

Identifying the resources needed to solve new problems, or skills he needs to be effective;

Identifying and learning how to use these resources to acquire the skills and informational needs, particularly for continued learning on his own following the training.

Developing or taking advantage of opportunities for skill practice.

Experiential learning shifts the focus of attention from the teacher to the learner, to learning rather than to teaching, creative-thinking and problem-solving rather than memorization, and responsibility for initiative and exploration rather than conformity.

A brief comparison of some aspects of the experiential and traditional approaches might help to clarify some of the differences between the two:

Experiential

1. Teachers and students decide on objectives, using provisional objectives established by the teacher as a base.
2. Student and teacher attempt to identify the most significant problems facing the students.

Traditional

1. Teachers decide on objectives. These may be more implicit than explicit and may or may not be communicated to the students.
2. Teacher lectures to students on those things he thinks they should know, or assigns reading.

Experiential

3. Students identify and make use of available resources (including other students) to obtain information they need to solve problems.
4. Students explore alternative solutions to problems.
5. Students and teacher examine possible consequences and evaluate relative effectiveness of various solutions.
6. Students reflect on, evaluate, and conceptualize the total experience.

Traditional

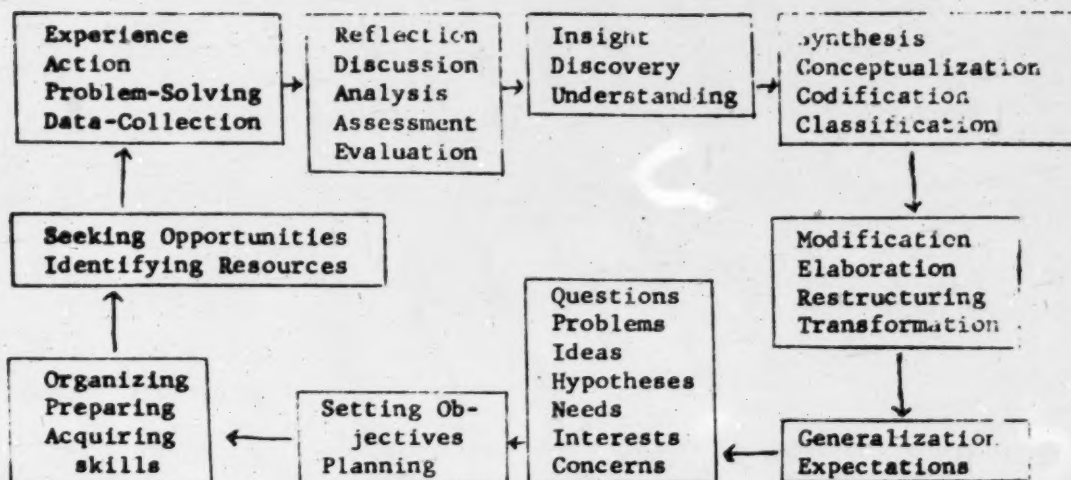
3. Teacher conducts demonstration. Students observe.
4. Teacher assigns practical exercises or problems. Students complete the assignment.
5. Teacher prepares test for knowledge and understanding. Students take the test.
6. Teacher evaluates trainee's performance.

The experiential approach makes primary use of inductive, discovery, and critical thinking methods of learning rather than the traditional methods of presenting rules or principles, giving examples or illustrations, assigning one-right-answer-type exercises or problems, and testing for retention, the modes typical of the traditional system.

The Experiential Learning Model

A model of the experiential learning process is represented in Figure 1. The model is designed not only to facilitate learning, but to facilitate learning how to learn.

FIGURE 1
The Experiential Learning Model



The process of experiential teaching usually begins with the experiences of students, the action they take, problem-solving, the data or information they collect, and the process of collecting the data. These are treated in a very similar fashion. The model represents not only the proposed educational process to be followed in teaching, but a continuing process to be internalized by the student as he "learns how to learn." The rewards for this kind of learning are not in grades, recognition, and so on, but rather the internal rewards of achievement and satisfaction inherent in the process.

Creative problem-solving is not an event but a process itself, involving steps or phases such as the following:

1. Problem identification or recognition.
2. Identification of persons who should be involved in the solution.
3. Definition and redefinition of the problem.
4. Exploration of possible approaches, perceptions or interpretations.
5. Collection of data about the problem in preparation for solution.

6. Development of criteria for evaluation of solutions.
7. Generation of possible alternative solutions.
8. Analysis and evaluation of alternatives.
9. Decision and implementation of solution.
10. Testing, Verification, Feedback.

At the end of the problem-solving process, or at any point in the process, students then proceed into reflection, discussion, assessment, evaluation, and on through the Experiential Model, as he would with any other experience.

Looking at the process in the Experiential Model:

1. Experience is defined rather broadly. It includes anything that happens that has any impact on the student, anything he experiences--participating in a new or different educational methodology; in the school community, interacting intensively with teacher and peers; participating in teaching exercises presented by the teacher; problems that develop; dilemmas; making or not making decisions; responsibility or lack of responsibility for learning, etc.

2. Experiential Learning begins with the experience, followed by reflection, discussion, analysis, and evaluation of the experience. The assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims, ambitions, and expectations (which become progressively more clear as a result of the process). Preferably this is done with others who might not share our particular biases or perceptions. If we do not share our experience with others, the process can lead to reinforcement and freezing of existing biases and assumptions. The experience and discussion take on added meaning when they can be related to objections that are meaningful to the students, and evaluated against criteria he has helped to develop.

3. From these processes come the insights, the discoveries, and understanding. The pieces fall into place, and the experience takes on added meaning in relation to other experiences.

4. All of this is then conceptualized, synthesized, and integrated into the individual's system of constructs which he imposes on the world, through which he views, perceives, categorizes, evaluates, and seeks experience.

5. The introduction of the new information or understanding may allow or require the individual to modify, elaborate, restructure, or even to completely transform the particular concept or construct into which it is assimilated.

6. The new concept or construct is now viewed in relation to the total system of constructs, generalized to past and future experiences. He faces the world with a new, different, or modified set of expectations.

7. During these activities, however, a clearer picture is obtained of what is missing or what is not yet clear--questions yet unanswered, problems that need to be solved; hypotheses are formulated; ideas develop; and needs, concerns, and interests are identified.

8. Objectives are then established, and plans are made to achieve these objectives.

9. The necessary organizing and preparing is done to set the plans in action. Measures are taken to acquire any additional skills needed.

10. Resources are identified and opportunities are watched for to gain additional experience, take action, solve problems, or obtain necessary information or data.

Data Collection, or information gathering, logically follows the perception of need, a need to answer certain questions, fill in gaps in understanding, or to find facts or principles needed to solve problems. It would include any of the traditional ways of collecting data--lectures, reading demonstrations, feedback, etc. But used within the experiential model, these processes become more interesting and the data more meaningful and relevant. The purpose of data collection is to obtain information that the student feels he might need now or sometime in the future. The student is not being spoon-fed information or facts he sees no particular need for or does not understand, but instead is actively seeking information he himself has decided he needs or would like to have, either in preparation for

solution of problems he can anticipate, to develop a better understanding of the situation he will be in, or because of a genuine interest and curiosity.

Teacher and Student Roles in Experiential Training

Even if anyone had the information it would be impossible, in a methods course to provide the students with all of the information they need to understand the children and their cultures and their role as teachers. It is part of the students responsibility to structure the learning process so that they can internalize this process and use it for continued learning during their teaching. Learning how to learn is probably the most valuable experience of this approach.

The teacher must design experiences for the students that simulate classroom situations or that will elicit responses, attitudes, and behaviors that are of significant to the student role. These situations should require skill in interpersonal relations, sensitivity to the needs of others, and an understanding of cross-cultural differences and expectations of the communities in the situation. The student is then able to assess his effectiveness in the situation on the basis of this assessment to determine learning needs.

The teacher is responsible for identifying problems that are relevant to the future situations the student will face as a teacher, problems that are difficult, complex, and open-ended. The student should be required to solve these problems with little or no assistance from the teacher (just as they will as teachers) and then to evaluate the effectiveness of their solutions, particularly in respect to the cross-cultural consequences.

Significant content material and appropriate methods of presentation must be identified by the teacher. All of the experiences and problems mentioned previously would contain content, which should be relevant and meaningful as well as appropriate to the method of presentation. Lectures, panel discussions, films, reading materials, etc., will be more effective if presented in a way that is consistent with the experiential methodology. Also, if they are not consistent with the methodology, students will very likely react

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negatively, having experienced the freedom of the experiential program. Within the experiential methodology, a lecture is not given to meet the need of the teacher to pass on information or to entertain the students. It is given to meet an expressed or apparent need of the students, at a time when they are ready and receptive. Even the method of presentation should be different, to allow for maximum participation of the students--prescribing content or information they want, questioning, interpreting, and evaluating. It puts the teacher on the spot, but we feel this is where he should be.

The assumption is made that the professor has a great deal of information and experience that would be of value to the prospective teacher. But if the student are not receptive to information or do not see its relevance to their needs, they will hear very little that is said, understand very little of what they hear, and retain little of what they understand.

The content of the lecture is most effective if it is meaningful to the students in terms of their own perceived needs or goals. If the student have not defined their goals, or if their goals are not consistent with the goals of the training program, this is a problem that can be handled within the experiential model, by exploring the conflict as a significant experience, and a problem to be solved. Some conflicts will always exist. The teachers will have information they consider important for which at least some of the students will not recognize a need. It is the responsibility of the teacher then to attempt to create the conditions or a situation that will help the students recognize the need, rather than to force it on the students whether they are ready for it or not.

Occasionally, teachers may feel that it is time for a particular conceptual or methodological input of which the students are unaware and for which they thus could not see a need. Such an input should be presented as something they can use immediately, with provisions for its use, or it will be relatively meaningless to the student and very likely rejected.

The teacher is responsible for designing a program of sequential learning experiences, with one experience building on and complementing another, so that the students are required to make use of the learnings of previous experiences in subsequent

situations or in problem-solving. Teachers must remain flexibly and sensitively responsive to the mood and needs of the students and be prepared to modify their teaching if it appears that something other than what had been scheduled would be more expedient. Teachers should be ready to listen to the students when they criticize or offer suggestions, and should be ready to modify their teaching if the students suggest something that would appear to be as effective or more effective than what was planned.

An attempt is made in experiential training to create a total learning community, one in which the students and staff work together to identify and achieve the learning objectives. The primary purpose of the community is to promote and facilitate assumption of responsibility by the students to take full advantage of the opportunities that exist for learning in the program, to work together in making use of all available resources, including each other, to learn to be effective teachers. The community itself allows the students to study the formation of a new culture and a community and all the attendant problems, a community and culture in which they are intimately and emotionally involved.

Role of the Experiential Trainer Versus That of the Traditional Trainer

In experiential teaching, the teacher serves primarily as facilitator, catalyst, and resource. Much as a coach, in the beginning he provides the rules and structure, he helps each person develop the skills and understanding to play the game or to perform effectively, and he works with each individual to help him continuously improve his performance. He emphasizes cooperation and team work, so that the team can assist in the development of each team member and each individual can contribute as much as possible to the effectiveness of the total team.

But it is the person coached who plays the game, and in experiential training the game is learning. Each student is learning to be an effective learner; and for most students, experiential learning is a whole new ball game.

The role of the teacher in experiential training is quite different from his role in traditional training. The differences are sometimes subtle, but nevertheless important. A comparison might help clarify the differences between the two:

The Experiential Teacher

1. Focuses on the process of learning--learning how to learn.
2. Involves the students actively in assuming the responsibility for their own learning.
3. Helps students learn to be active information seekers, identifying and making effective use of available resources.
4. Expects the students to find and use information as needed to solve problems.
5. Expects the students to learn by exploration and discovery, asking questions, formulating and testing hypotheses, solving problems.
6. Focuses on the creative process of identifying and solving open-ended, real-life problems with many possible solutions. There is no expert.
7. Formulates clearly defined objectives based on the needs of the students.
8. Involves the students in the identification of their own learning needs and objectives.
9. Involves the students in assessment and evaluation of the training experience, information obtained, and progress toward objectives.
10. Focuses on individual achievement in relation to the students own needs and objectives.
11. Focuses on helping the students learn to work effectively with others in cooperative, problem-solving activities.

The Traditional Teacher:

1. Focuses on the presentation of content, facts, and information.
2. Assumes the responsibility for deciding what the students need and motivating them to learn.
3. Decides what the students need and provide it through lectures, reading assignments, films, etc.
4. Expects the students to learn the material presented, for recall on examinations.
5. Expects the students to learn primarily by memorization and formulation of responses to questions.
6. Focuses on the completion of textbook-type exercises or problems, with "one right answer". The teacher is the expert.
7. Formulated objectives, but usually based on "covering" a specified amount of material.
8. Expects the students to accept the objectives specified for the course.
9. Assesses and evaluates the material he presents, effectiveness of presentation, and performance and progress of each student.
10. Focuses on performance in relation to the group, with grading on the normal curve.
11. Focuses on competition with peers for achievement, recognition, grades, and other rewards.

12. Focuses on group discussions and activities conducted and evaluated by the students themselves.
 13. Works toward open communication between students and the teacher.
 14. Invites ideas, suggestions, and criticism from the students; involves the student in decision-making.
 15. Encourages informality and spontaneity in the classroom; establishes informal relationships with the students.
 16. Promotes a questioning attitude, constructive discontent, reliance on the student's own judgment.
 17. Attempts to develop a climate of openness, trust, and concern for others, with maximum feedback to each person of information he needs to evaluate his performance and progress.
 18. Structures the training so that unplanned and unexpected problems will be treated as learning opportunities.
12. Focuses on lectures, group discussions, and other activities led and evaluated by the student.
 13. Focuses on one-way communication from the teacher to the student, with little communication from the students.
 14. Makes the decision or carries out decisions made by the system; discourages suggestions or criticism from the students.
 15. Establishes formal procedures and control in the classroom and formal relationships with the students.
 16. Requires respect for the teacher as the authority, distrust of the student's own judgment.
 17. Promotes competition among students creating a climate of distrust and lack of concern for others; provides feedback to students regarding performance on examinations.
 18. Follows the schedule closely; avoids problems or dispenses with them quickly so they will not interfere with the schedule.

Difficulties in the Role

The role of the experiential teacher is not an easy role for the traditional teacher to assume. It represents an entirely new system of attitudes and behaviors. Teachers trying the experiential approach have found that even if they can accept this approach and their new role intellectually, it is difficult for them to adapt emotionally and behaviorally. Over a period of many years as students and instructors in the traditional education system, they have developed a pattern of conditioned responses to the stimuli of the classroom. This pattern is very difficult to change, particularly when many of the students will resist the change and try to force the teacher back into the familiar, traditional role.

Most teachers need to relearn how to learn, in a way that was probably quite natural to them as young children, but which was stamped out as they learned to accept the authority of their teachers and to discount their own judgment and experience. They have had very little practice with the use of the inductive, discovery, and critical-thinking modes of learning required in experiential training. In many ways, learning in the experiential way is more difficult, however. It requires more effort, investment, and responsibility. Students will criticize the teacher, sometimes with considerable hostility, for not assuming what they believe to be his responsibility and for trying to force them to assume responsibilities they never had to assume before. They will bait him with questions they themselves could or should answer, and will ask for direction or decisions when they themselves should be deciding. They will try to force him to give them the solution to a problem when they would learn far more by struggling with the solution themselves. It is too easy for the traditional teacher to pick up the bait and do all the things he should not do if he wants to achieve active and responsible participation of his students.

Teachers also have to be aware of their own needs in the traditional system--the power they have over students who have to conform to their ways or leave, the satisfactions they gain from well-organized courses and well-delivered lectures, the security they feel when they are in control of the classroom situation. It is easy for teachers to

fall into the trap of enjoying and perpetuating their position of power, authority, and influence. It is also less threatening to them if they keep the students at a distance, under control, and thinking and talking about issues with which he is comfortable.

But power is shared in experiential teaching. As a result, the teaching may appear to be chaotic and disorganized, and it may not follow the schedule. There may be few lectures (unless the students perceive a need for them) and the teachers cannot hide behind a set of lecture notes (they have to cope with questions as they are formulated by the students and must be willing to admit it if they do not have answers).

It is expected that the teacher have information and understanding that should be shared with the students. What he often does not realize, however, is that he may be denying them the same joy of discovery or achievement and the resulting increased understanding and self-esteem that he has experienced, by asking them to perform the relatively dull task of learning or memorizing what he has discovered through a long and difficult process. He sometimes forgets too that his own learning has been slow and incremental. He often cannot understand why his very clear and logical explanations are not readily understood and appreciated by the students.

It should be obvious that the teachers role in experiential teaching would require a major re-education and reorientation of most teachers. But the students role changes drastically also, and a major responsibility of the teacher is to help the students learn how to learn in the new system. The student who is accustomed to traditional education has difficulty understanding what is expected of him in experiential learning, and is highly suspicious that the teacher does not really mean what he says-- "no staff member with power is going to share that power with the student"; "the student is really being evaluated against the performance of his peers, not against his own needs and objectives"; and "attempts to involve the students are really not so subtle forms of manipulation." These are assumptions many students make, assumptions that it will be very difficult for the staff to disprove.

But the teacher has to examine his own assumptions, too, against those discussed in Chapter One. The traditional teacher makes the assumption that deficiencies in sensitivity to others, tolerance and open-mindedness, patience and understanding, and

effective interpersonal behavior are personality characteristics that cannot be corrected in a short teaching program. He is correct, in that these represent attitudes and behaviors that are unlikely to change in a traditional teaching program, but which can be changed or modified in experiential teaching. These deficiencies very often must be corrected if the individual is to live and work effectively in a culture different from his own. This is a humanizing process that is very necessary for persons who for so many years have been subjected to the dehumanizing experience of traditional education.